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ABSTRACT

The increases in the number and level of foreign language requirements in school systems throughout the country are explained, and the problems and concerns that stem from these changes are described. Solutions to these problems are enumerated, including: (1) reducing class size; (2) increasing foreign language entrance requirements for both secondary and postsecondary educational levels; and (3) offering basal and honors sections at each level of foreign language instruction. A review of the literature on the success of foreign language in the elementary schools (FLES) programs is offered as a basis for the assertion that foreign language study should begin in the elementary schools, thus expanding the years of study of a foreign language. Finally, the status of legislation pertaining to foreign language study in Florida and North Carolina is briefly discussed. (DJD)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE: DO IT RIGHT!

BY

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE: DO IT RIGHT!

For many years foreign language advocates in this country have been doggedly urging educators and policy makers to increase the foreign language requirements and to make them an integral part of the school curriculum. In The Tongue Tied American, Senator Paul Simon points out the serious commitment of all seventy-two countries surveyed to the learning of languages. In his estimation, "none can compare to the United States in the neglect of foreign languages." (Simon, 1980, p. 99). From the research on the proven benefits of foreign language acquisition, to the many anecdotes of embarrassingly "faux pas" in American international relations, nothing appears more obvious than the need to attack this deficiency in our educational tradition.

Former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett includes two years of foreign language requirement in his "James Madison High School" proposal, as part of the strengthened core curriculum for all the students in the nation. Individual states are also responding. Five states have instituted a law or regulation mandating the inclusion of foreign languages in the elementary level. In Florida, students applying for admission to state universities, must have completed two years of sequential foreign languages in the secondary school level. The mandatory requirement of two years of foreign language for high school graduation is being contemplated.

Is this a VICTORY for us believers in the value of multilingualism? We are definitely moving in the right direction; our voices are being heard and actions are being taken. However, are we in danger of repeating the mistakes of the

past in the field of foreign language study in this country? Past failures negated, in fact, the only worthwhile goal of the study of languages, which is proficiency.

These failures caused disappointments that ultimately lead to the demise of the efforts that we promote. High school teachers report, with dismay, that their first level classes are becoming less and less proficient since the university requirement came into effect. Before, foreign language teachers generally had the highly motivated language students, but now they are faced with large numbers of college bound freshmen, who view this requirement as meaningless, and will become one of throngs of adults who, smugly, confess: "I had two years of Spanish (or French, or German) in high school, and cannot speak a word."

Teachers of other academic disciplines smile knowingly with a "Welcome to the real world, colleague; you had it easy until now." The complaints of teachers can not be entirely attributed to the fact that, prior to this, they generally had smaller groups of highly motivated and academically inclined students. Their frustrations are based on the realization that in a classroom with over thirty students, some excited about learning the language, and others much less so, their chances of success are minimal. Much time is spent on classroom management and teaching techniques aimed at motivating the uninterested student. Consequently, the frustration level is high, for teachers and for students.

However, the profession has entered an enthusiastic new phase. We have now surpassed the many centuries of foreign language grammar and translation instruction. We have also moved away from the audiolingual method derived

from Skinner's behaviorism. We are now teaching for "proficiency." The basis of many of the states' foreign language frameworks are the highly praised Proficiency Guidelines developed by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

Another big word in current goals and objectives is "culture." Not only must we teach students to understand and produce the language in real life situations, but also to become familiar and at ease with the history and the idiosyncrasies of the countries of the target language. These are clearly high and worthwhile expectations. We have vastly expanded the goals of foreign language instruction, but within the same structure that produced generations of "non-speakers." Are we then setting ourselves up for failure, one more time?

What solutions are being offered to achieve foreign language proficiency?

REDUCE CLASS SIZE

Reducing class size is essential and inherent to the teaching of foreign languages with expectations of proficiency. According to Sizer, a normal teaching load should be limited to 80 students per day (Sizer 1984, p. 19). In a foreign language class, how many utterances can be realistically expected from each of 30 to 40 students in a 50 to 55 minute class? How many students will be completely turned off while the teacher patiently waits to elicit the labored responses of a novice in the target language. On the other hand, the goals of cultural awareness can only be achieved through explorations involving elaborate projects, field trips, visuals, readings, and research. Only then can these experiences be internalized and become meaningful and lasting to the

students. A lower teacher-student ratio must be mandated by the state legislators, and encouraged by administrators.

INCREASE ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS

Departmental policies toughening course entrance requirements and testing for language aptitude are double edged swords. Those of us who have stopped short of standing on our heads to promote foreign language programs because we believe in the value of multilingualism for all, cringe at the idea of rejecting students. So far, no measures or techniques have demonstrated any measure of reliability. Since it is a college entrance requirement, any limitation is a delicate concept that will affect the students' future opportunities. In any case, if we consider the possibility of requiring foreign languages for high school graduation, as proposed by former Secretary Bennett, these departmental policies would become impossible to enforce. On the other hand, claims that some students should delay taking level one of the foreign language until their sophomore or junior year, when they are "more mature," are also questionable. Actually, research indicates that students should begin to study foreign languages at an early age.

OFFER HONOR AND BASAL SECTIONS OF EACH LEVEL

The offering of basal and honor level courses in the beginning sections could be explored. Students who are intrinsically interested in Advanced Placement level courses, should be encouraged to take the challenge of a stiffer curriculum in an honor class, while those who merely wish to complete an unwanted requirement could do so in a regular class. Even though other disciplines offer this type of varied level curriculum, the concept of

homogeneous grouping is controversial, and not generally favored. The logistics of scheduling would become more complicated, but guidance departments should view this solution as an opportunity to meet student needs.

This approach, however, does nothing to meet the intent of the implementation of the two year requirement, which is to develop a population of citizens well versed in foreign languages and cultures, able to meet the global challenges of the twenty first century. If we are to offer this band-aid solution to the initial results of the legislative mandates, we are negating what our profession has always stood for, and fought for. We would continue to educate the elite, doing our best through the new methodologies and technology to fulfill goals of proficiency and international awareness. The remaining students, who would constitute the majority, would trudge along in basic classes, uninterested, unmotivated, using up funds to fulfill a bureaucratic and meaningless mandate, to become generations of ethnocentric monolinguists, against whom all our efforts had been directed in the first place.

DO IT RIGHT! A PROPOSAL FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Why do we continue to ignore the obvious fact that has been repeatedly proven by research and by the long established practices of other countries? Mildred R. Donoghue summarized the findings of research on foreign languages in elementary school: Genessee's study in Montreal concluded that children of all ability levels, high and low, profit from Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools (FLES) programs; DiPietro's study in Virginia concluded that FLES encourages increased interest in the academic subjects; another study by Genesse, Tucker and Lambert found that young second language students in

Canada develop social sensitivity and communication skills. (Donoghue, 1981, p. 602). In "The Success of Cherry Hill," Howe reported on the benefits of an immersion program in the elementary level and of the "great support and favorable involvement" of parents. (Howe, 1983, p. 596). Barkin and Guntermann pointed out that numerous research studies have discovered the positive impact on reading skills, English vocabulary learning, self-concept, creativity, cultural enrichment, and communication skills of students involved in foreign language studies. Barkin, Gunterman, Peal and Lambert, who had set out to prove that bilingualism had a negative effect, in a Montreal study, "found the opposite to be true." (Barkin, 1982, p. 50). An article in Newsweek recorded the overwhelming success of the Fairbanks language-immersion program in the Detroit School System, noting that it was created as a counterpart to the bilingual education program. (Newsweek, 1984, p. 92)

Gladys Lipton, in the September 1988 issue of the Northeast Conference Newsletter, provides a summary and update on the more recent research:

> Research in the early 1980's on the early introduction of foreign language has confirmed earlier studies done in the 1960's and 70's. The following findings help to persuade teachers, parents, and administrators of the value of early foreign language instruction.
> * There is evidence that a child's ability to learn and excel in the pronunciation of a foreign language is greatest before puberty.
> * In successful programs of long standing, a strong link between success in the foreign language program and success in other subjects in the elementary school curriculum has been validated.

> * The following competencies have been shown to be developed: listening and communication skills, memory training, good learning and study habits,an understanding of language arts concepts, and the development of effective cross-cultural understandings.
> * Research studies indicate higher scores in reading and mathematics for students who have studied foreign language in the grades, as well as greater cognitive development in such areas as mental flexibility, creativity, divergent thinking and the expansion of children's horizons.
> * Language study gives young students an appreciation of other cultures and develops an openness to other people and typical patterns of daily life. (Lipton, 1988, p. 58)

Furthermore, the sixth recommendation of A Nation At Risk is totally clear:

> Achieving proficiency in a foreign language ordinarily requires from four to six years of study and should, therefore, be started in the elementary grades. We believe it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English-speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one's native tongue, and serves the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education. (U.S. Department of Education, A Nation at Risk, 1983, P.12)

Senator Simon's investigation pointed out that all seventy-six respondent nations, from Afghanistan to Zaire, all include the study of foreign languages for extensive periods of time as an integral part of their core curriculum. In most countries, foreign language learning begins in the elementary school. All of them require foreign language studies in the secondary level and for entrance into the universities.

The best way to become fluent, to have a workable knowledge of another language, to develop attitude and aptitude, is the same path athletes and musicians follow: start young and expand the years of study. A program at least as extensive as physical education, should be established beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the middle school and high school, with

solid articulation and commitment. There are four identified foreign language type programs in the elementary level: total immersion, partial immersion, foreign languages in elementary school (FLES) and foreign language experience (FLEX). In evaluating the outcome, only the most intensive program of the four types, total immersion, has yielded results commensurate with native like fluency and proficiency. Yet, we still mandate the inviolate and apparently magical two year requirement in high school, and become bitterly disappointed when students do not perform, when teachers become demoralized, and when we perpetuate the patterns of isolationism so evident in the historical evolution of this country.

Florida is a glaring example of the need to refine the half-measure proposed by its legislature. Florida, with one of the most diverse populations of the fifty states, with its rich Spanish heritage - past and present - with its privileged geography for trade, and its paradisiacal climate for tourism, should become a leader in the area of foreign languages. As it is, North Carolina, a state sometimes conceived as provincial and conservative, is far ahead of the others, with a law that mandates that by 1993 every child must take a second language in grades K-5 and that at least one second language must be provided by the school systems for all students K-12.

Doing it right could well have tremendous impact on all aspects of the state's growth in the "global village" of the twenty first century. The same applies to the entire student body in the United States of America. Foreign languages for all students, yes. Foreign language requirements for graduation, yes. Foreign language proficiency, with cultural awareness, yes. Foreign languages as avenues for personal, intellectual, social, and emotional growth, yes. But, this time, let's do it right!

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